

The Price Of The Party

U.S. ARMY COMBAT READINESS CENTER

What price would you pay to go partying? Would you consider paying with your life? Sometimes the price of a good time can be very high.

The young NCO was tired as he drove his German sports sedan down the autobahn. He and his three passengers, a couple of junior enlisted Soldiers and the civilian girlfriend of one of them, had partied from just after midnight till about 4 a.m. The Soldiers had to get back in time for the morning PT formation, and the young NCO was pushing hard on the gas pedal. Although the recommended autobahn speed limit was 130 kilometers per hour—or 80 mph—he was doing more than 110 mph. The Soldiers had gotten into a lifestyle of partying well into the morning hours and then rushing back to post for formation.

They'd been on the road for about 20 minutes and had covered 38 of the 61 miles back to post. The young NCO looked ahead, saw a couple of tractor-trailers in his lane and moved to the left to pass them. It had rained lightly earlier that morning and the road was still a bit wet. He flew past the first tractor-trailer and was swiftly overtaking the second. For whatever reason, perhaps because he was tired or, possibly, because his vision was obscured by rainwater swept onto his windshield, he didn't see the left-hand curve ahead. Instead of rounding the curve, the car went straight and struck the tractor-trailer's left-rear drive wheels. The impact spun the car counterclockwise 360 degrees. The car then slammed into the left-rear corner of the trailer. Now jammed beneath the trailer, the car was dragged 100 yards down the road before the truck's driver could stop.

The damage to the car was horrendous. The impact had crushed the car's roof, pushing it rearward and to the left. Despite the roof crushing to within 6 inches of his head restraint, the young NCO survived, opened his door and got out. He then went to the left-rear door and got the young woman out of the car. After trying to talk to the truck driver and taking the girl to the truck's cab to keep warm, the NCO went back to check on the other two Soldiers in his car. Neither showed any signs of life. Both had been sitting on the right side of the car—one in the front seat and one in the backseat—and died when the car's roof was crushed during the accident.

Why did this accident happen?

- The driver was overconfident and fatigued and drove beyond his abilities for the conditions. Because of his fatigue and, possibly, his vision being obscured by rainwater swept onto his windshield, he lost situational awareness. Because he didn't recognize he was entering a left-hand curve, he drove straight and collided with the truck.
- The driver was traveling at an excessive speed when he attempted to pass the tractor-trailers. As a result, he lacked the reaction time needed to avoid the collision.
- The driver showed poor discipline by disregarding his leaders' directions regarding his off-duty activities. His pattern of partying until the early morning hours had affected his on-duty performance, and his leaders had directed him to discontinue that behavior.



Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided to help prevent future losses:

- Educate Soldiers on the dangers posed by driving at night, fatigued and in bad weather conditions to help them recognize their own driving limitations.
- Educate Soldiers on the dangers of driving at excessive speeds and how such speeds deny them the reaction time needed to avoid an accident.
- Commanders must ensure young NCOs understand their responsibilities as junior leaders and recognize how indiscipline on their part affects the Soldiers they supervise. Commanders must also take action to identify, counsel and follow-up with Soldiers who display high-risk behaviors.

Concluding thoughts

Losing a Soldier to an off-duty accident reduces unit readiness as much as losing one on duty. Because of that, leaders can't afford to look only at the impact on duty performance caused by a Soldier's unsafe off-duty behavior. A leader's responsibility for his Soldiers' safety doesn't stop at the end of the duty day or at the front gate. It's a 24/7 mission.

FYI---Looking for information relating to driver's training? Visit the POV Toolbox at the USACRC Web site <https://crc.army.mil/> for information on establishing and maintaining an effective driver's training program. The toolbox is a onestop shop for Commanders, leaders, noncommissioned officers and individuals and offers an abundance of driver training resources. Taking care of our Soldiers behind the wheel both on duty and off duty keeps our Army Strong!